

Cultural diversity forum addresses tensions in Santa Ana

The gathering comes against a backdrop of Latino retailers' fears and an official's comparison of a Jewish developer to Hitler. Some participants cite instances of bigotry across Orange County.

By Nicole Santa Cruz, Los Angeles Times

At a Santa Ana City Council meeting in August, Mayor Pro Tem Claudia Alvarez compared a Jewish business developer to Adolf Hitler and talked of ethnic cleansing in the downtown area, where some Latino retailers feel they have been marginalized. The reaction was swift. The Anti-Defamation League called for her resignation. The City Council censured her and sought ways to defuse the racial and religious tensions Alvarez's remark revealed. By the next day, she had apologized, but the fury did not subside.

On Thursday, it was Alvarez who was helping lead a forum on cultural diversity to examine issues of hate that have cropped up not just in Santa Ana but throughout Orange County. The invitation-only event quickly underscored the anger and frustration still being felt. "How is this going to help anything?" one woman asked. Said another: "Our civil rights are being violated, and it is kind of a secret thing to get rid of the Mexican community in downtown Santa Ana."

This all comes at a difficult time for the city, which could see a \$30-million deficit in the next fiscal year. As of Sept. 30, there was only \$313,000 on hand in the General Fund, said Francisco Gutierrez, the city's finance director. However, Santa Ana is still expecting revenue from sales and property taxes before the end of the year. The battle by Latino business owners against a special property tax, which is what led to Alvarez's Hitler comment, looms large in Santa Ana, where 78% of the 324,000 residents are Latino. Some contend that the tax money benefits businesses that don't cater to families or the Latino clientele.

Alvarez's remark, however, is not an aberration in the county of 3 million, according to Kevin O'Grady, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League of Orange County and Greater Long Beach. "We're here talking about Latino and Jewish relations, but there's a lot of discrimination and bigotry in Orange County," O'Grady told participants at the forum, which was streamed live. He outlined instances of bullying, including one in which sixth- and seventh-grade boys were beaten in north Orange County because they were Jewish. He also said Temple Beth David in Westminster is one of the most targeted temples in the country in terms of swastika graffiti.

Rabbi Frank Stern, president of the Orange County Interfaith Network, cited another instance of hate speech — one involving Deborah Pauly, a Villa Park councilwoman. Pauly, speaking outside a community center in nearby Yorba Linda in February, pointed at the building and said: "What's going on over there right now ... that is pure, unadulterated evil." The evil was an Islamic charity event, and in a video taken that day, families with small children can be seen walking into the center while protesters carrying American flags chant, "Go back home!" Pauly's words drew national attention, and she later said she was directing her comments at controversial speakers at the meeting, not the families attending.

And last month, San Juan Capistrano Councilman Derek Reeve said he named his dog Muhammad after the Muslim prophet, which many who follow Islam found offensive. "There have been some very troubling and racist statements," O'Grady said in an interview before the forum, adding that his organization looks at the rhetoric elected officials use and the level of civility in political dialogue. When those statements are made — particularly by an elected official — "it sends a message that says it's OK to engage in that sort of speech," he said.

One forum participant asked about the conduct of politicians: "How is it that we're allowing a certain sector of our community to say these kinds of things whether it's done purposefully or not.... How do we go from there?" O'Grady responded: "I think we do it by continually speaking out against it." The forum was a good beginning. More than 60 people attended, including community leaders and business owners such as Rusty Kennedy, executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission, and Shawn Makhani, who owns a fabric store.